

SUBSTANCE OF THE SPEECH

OF THE

RIGHT HONOURABLE

EDMUND BURKE,

IN THE

DEBATE ON THE ARMY ESTIMATES,

IN THE

HOUSE OF COMMONS,

On Tuesday, the 9th Day of February, 1790.

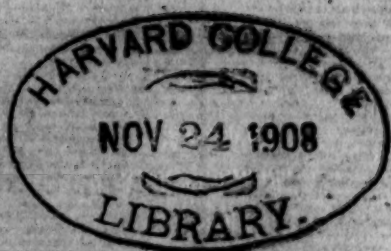
COMPREHENDING A DISCUSSION OF THE PRESENT
SITUATION OF AFFAIRS IN FRANCE.

THE THIRD EDITION,

D U B L I N:

PRINTED BY P. BYRNE, GRAFTON-STREET.

1790.



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SUBSTANCE OF THE SPEECH

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EDMUND BURKE.

MR. Burke's speech on the Report of the army has not been correctly stated in some of the public papers. It is of consequence to him not to be misunderstood. The matter which incidentally came into discussion is of the most serious importance. It is thought that the heads and substance of the speech will answer the purpose sufficiently. If in making the abstract, through defect of memory, in the person who now gives it, any difference at all should be perceived from the speech as it was spoken, it will not, the editor imagines, be found in any thing which may amount to a retraction of the opinions he then maintained, or to any softening in the expressions in which they were conveyed.

Mr. Burke spoke a considerable time in answer to various arguments which had been insisted upon by Mr. Grenville and Mr. Pitt, for keeping an increased peace establishment, and against an improper jea-

lousy of the Ministers, in whom a full confidence, subject to responsibility, ought to be placed, on account of the real situation of affairs; the exact state of which it frequently happened, that they could not disclose, without violating the constitutional and political secrecy, necessary to the well being of their country.

Mr. Burke said in substance, "that confidence might become a vice, and jealousy a virtue, according to circumstances. That confidence, of all public virtues, was the most dangerous, and jealousy in an House of Commons, of all public vices, the most tolerable; especially where the number and the charge of standing armies, in time of peace, was the question.

That in the annual mutiny bill, the annual army was declaredly to be for the purpose of preserving the balance of power in Europe. The propriety of its being larger or smaller depended, therefore, upon the true state of that balance. If the increase of peace establishments demanded of Parliament agreed with the manifest appearance of the balance, confidence in Ministers, as to the particulars, would be very proper. If the increase was not at all supported by any such appearance, he thought great jealousy might, and ought to be, entertained on that subject.

That he did not find, on a review of all Europe, that, politically, we stood in the smallest degree of danger from any one state or kingdom it contained; nor that any other foreign powers than our own allies were likely to obtain a considerable preponderance in the scale.

That France had hitherto been our first object, in all considerations, concerning the balance of power. The presence or absence of France totally varied every sort of speculation relative to that balance.

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That France is, at this time, in a political light, to be considered as expunged out of the system of Europe. Whether she could ever appear in it again, as a leading power, was not easy to determine: but at present he considered France as not politically existing; and most assuredly it would take up much time to restore her to her former active existence—*Gallus quoque in bellis floruisse audivimus*, might possibly be the language of the rising generation. He did not mean to deny that it was our duty to keep our eye on that nation, and to regulate our preparation by the symptoms of her recovery.

That it was to her *strength*, not to her *form of government* which we were to attend; because Republics, as well as monarchies, were susceptible of ambition, jealousy, and anger, the usual causes of war.

But if, while France continued in this swoon, we should go on increasing our expences, we should certainly make ourselves less a match for her, when it became our concern to arm.

It was said, that as she had speedily fallen, she might speedily rise again. He doubted this. That the fall from an height was with an accelerated velocity; but to lift a weight up to that height again was difficult, and opposed by the laws of physical and political gravitation.

In a political view, France was low indeed. She had lost every thing, even to her name.

He

“ Jacet ingens littore truncus

“ Avolsūmque humeris caput et sine nomine corpus.”*

* Mr. Burke, probably, had in his mind the remainder of the passage, and was filled with some congenial apprehensions:

“ Hæc finis Priami fatorum; hic exitus illum

“ Sorte tulit, Trojam incensam, & prolapsa videntem

“ Pergama; tot quondam populis, terrisque, superbum

“ Regnatorem

He was astonished at it—he was alarmed at it—he trembled at the uncertainty of all human greatness.

Since the House had been prorogued in the summer much work was done in France. The French had shewn themselves the ablest architects of ruin that had hitherto existed in the world. In that very short space of time they had completely pulled down to the ground, their monarchy; their church; their nobility; their law; their revenue; their army; their navy; their commerce; their arts; and their manufactures. They had done their business for us as rivals, in a way in which twenty Ramilies or Blenheims could never have done it. Were we absolute conquerors, and France to lye prostrate at our feet, we should be ashamed to send a commission to settle their affairs, which could impose so hard a law upon the French, and so destructive of all their consequence as a nation, as that they had imposed upon themselves.

France, by the mere circumstances of its vicinity, had been, and in a degree always must be, an object of our vigilance, either with regard to her actual power, or to her influence and example. As to the former, he had spoken; as to the latter, (her example) he should say a few words: for by this example our friendship and our intercourse with that nation had once been, and might again, become more dangerous to us than their worst hostility.

In the last century, Louis the Fourteenth had established a greater and better disciplined military force than ever had been before seen in Europe, and with it a perfect despotism. Though that despotism was proudly

“ Regnatorem Asiæ. Jacet ingens littore truncus,

“ Avolsūque humeris caput, & sine nomine corpus.

“ At me tum primum sævus circumstetit horror;

“ Obstupui: subiit chari genitoris imago”——

proudly arrayed in manners, gallantry, splendor, magnificence, and even covered over with the imposing robes of science, literature, and arts, it was, in government, nothing better than painted and gilded tyranny; in religion, an hard stern intolerance, the fit companion and auxiliary to the despotic tyranny which prevailed in its government. The same character of despotism insinuated itself into every court of Europe—the same spirit of disproportioned magnificence—the same love of standing armies, above the ability of the people. In particular, our then Sovereigns, King Charles and King James, fell in love with the government of their neighbour, so flattering to the pride of Kings. A similarity of sentiments brought on connections equally dangerous to the interests and liberties of their country. It were well that the infection had gone no farther than the Throne. The admiration of a government flourishing and successful, unchecked in its operations, and seeming therefore to compass its objects more speedily and effectually, gained something upon all ranks of people. The good patriots of that day, however, struggled against it. They sought nothing more anxiously than to break off all communication with France, and to beget a total alienation from its councils and its example; which, by the animosity prevalent between the abettors of their religious system and the assertors of ours, was, in some degree, effected.

This day the evil is totally changed in France: but there is an evil there. The disease is altered; but the vicinity of the two countries remains, and must remain; and the natural mental habits of mankind are such, that the present distemper of France is far more likely to be contagious than the old one; for it is not quite easy to spread a passion for servitude among the people: but in all evils of the opposite kind our natural inclinations are flattered.

In

In the case of despotism there is the *ſædum crimen ſervitutis* ; in the laſt the *faſſa ſpecies libertatis* ; and accordingly, as the hiſtorian ſays, *promis auribus accipitur*.

In the laſt age we were in danger of being entangled by the example of France in the net of a relentless deſpotiſm. It is not neceſſary to ſay any thing upon that example. It exiſts no longer. Our preſent danger from the example of a people, whoſe character knows no medium, is, with regard to government, a danger from anarchy ; a danger of being led through an admiration of ſucceſsful fraud and violence, to an imitation of the exceſſes of an irrational, unprincipled, proſcribing, conſiſcating, plundering, ferocious, bloody, and tyrannical democracy. On the ſide of religion, the danger of their example is no longer from intolerance, but from Atheiſm ; a foul, unnatural vice, foe to all the dignity and conſolation of mankind ; which ſeems in France, for a long time, to have been embodied into a faction, accredited, and almoſt avowed.

Theſe are our preſent dangers from France : but, in his opinion, the very worſt part of the example ſet is, in the late aſſumption of citizenship by the army, and the whole of the arrangement, or rather diſarrangement of their military.

He was ſorry that his right honourable friend (Mr. Fox) had dropped even a word expreſſive of exultation on that circumſtance ; or that he ſeemed of opinion that the objection from ſtanding armies was at all leſſened by it. He attributed this opinion of Mr. Fox entirely to his known zeal for the beſt of all cauſes, Liberty. That it was with a pain in-expreſſible he was obliged to have even the ſhadow of a difference with his friend, whoſe authority would be always great with him, and with all thinking people—*Quæ maxima ſemper cenſetur nobis, et erit*

erit *quæ maxima semper*.—His confidence in Mr Fox was such, and so ample, as to be almost implicit. That he was not ashamed to avow that degree of docility. That when the choice is well made, it strengthens instead of oppressing our intellect. That he who calls in the aid of an equal understanding, doubles his own. He who profits of a superior understanding, raises his powers to a level with the height of the superior understanding he unites with. He had found the benefit of such a junction, and would not lightly depart from it. He wished almost, on all occasions, that his sentiments were understood to be conveyed in Mr. Fox's words; and that he wished, as amongst the greatest benefits he could wish the country, an eminent share of power to that right honourable gentleman; because he knew that, to his great and masterly understanding, he had joined the greatest possible degree of that natural moderation, which is the best corrective of power; that he was of the most artless, candid, open, and benevolent disposition; disinterested in the extreme; of a temper mild and placable, even to a fault; without one drop of gall in his whole constitution.

That the House must perceive, from his coming forward to mark an expression or two of his best friend, how anxious he was to keep the distemper of France from the least countenance in England, where he was sure some wicked persons had shewn a strong disposition to recommend an imitation of the French spirit of Reform. He was so strongly opposed to any the least tendency towards the *means* of introducing a democracy like theirs, as well as to the *end* itself, that much as it would afflict him, if such a thing could be attempted, and that any friend of his could concur in such measures, (he was far, very far, from believing they could); he would abandon his best friends, and join with his worst

enemies to oppose either the mean or the end ; and to resist all violent exertions of the spirit of innovation, so distant from all principles of true and safe reformation ; a spirit well calculated to overturn states, but perfectly unfit to amend them.

That he was no enemy to reformation. Almost every business in which he was much concerned, from the first day he sat in that House to that hour, was a business of reformation ; and when he had not been employed in correcting, he had been employed in resisting abuses. Some traces of this spirit in him now stand on their statute book. In his opinion, any thing which unnecessarily tore to pieces the contexture of the state, not only prevented all real reformation, but introduced evils which would call, but, perhaps, call in vain, for new reformation.

That he thought the French nation very unwise. What they valued themselves on, was a disgrace to them. They had gloried (and some people in England had thought fit to take share in that glory) in making a revolution ; as if revolutions were good things in themselves. All the horrors, and all the crimes of the anarchy which led to their revolution, which attend its progress, and which may virtually attend it in its establishment, pass for nothing with the lovers of revolutions. The French have made their way through the destruction of their country, to a bad constitution, when they were absolutely in possession of a good one. They were in possession of it the day the States met in separate orders. Their business, had they been either virtuous, or wise, or had been left to their own judgment, was to secure the stability and independence of the States, according to those orders, under the Monarch on the Throne. It was then their duty to redress grievances,

Instead

Instead of redressing grievances, and improving the fabric of their State, to which they were called by their Monarch, and sent by their Country, they were made to take a very different course. They first destroyed all the balances and counterpoises which serve to fix the state; and to give it a steady direction; and which furnish sure correctives to any violent spirit which may actuate any of the orders. These balances existed in their oldest constitution; and in the constitution of this country; and in the constitution all the countries in Europe. These they rashly destroyed, and then they melted down the whole into one incongruous, ill-connected mass.

When they had done this, they instantly, with the most atrocious perfidy and breach of all faith among men, laid the axe to the root of all property, and consequently of all national prosperity, by the principles they established, and the example they set, in confiscating all the possessions of the church. They made and recorded a sort of *institute* and *digest* of anarchy, called the rights of man, in such a pedantic abuse of elementary principles as would have disgraced boys at school; but this declaration of rights was worse than trifling and pedantic in them; as by their name and authority they systematically destroyed every hold of authority by opinion, religious or civil, on the minds of the people. By this mad declaration they subverted the state; and brought on such calamities as no country, without a long war, has ever been known to suffer, and which may in the end produce such a war, and, perhaps, many such. With them the question was not between despotism and liberty. The sacrifice they made of the peace and power of their country was not made on the altar of Freedom. Freedom, and a better security for freedom than that they have taken, they might have had without any sacrifice at all. They brought

themselves into all the calamities they suffer, not that through them they might obtain a British constitution; they plunged themselves headlong into those calamities, to prevent themselves from settling into that constitution, or into any thing resembling it.

That if they should perfectly succeed in what they propose, as they are likely enough to do, and establish a democracy, or a mob of democracies, in a country circumstanced like France, they will establish a very bad government—a very bad species of tyranny.

That, the worst effect of their proceeding was on their military, which was rendered an army for every purpose but that of defence. That, if the question was, whether soldiers were to forget they were citizens, as an abstract proposition, he could have no difference about it; though, as it is usual, when abstract principles are to be applied, much was to be thought on the manner of uniting the character of citizen and soldier. But as applied to the events which had happened in France, where the abstract principle was cloathed with its circumstances, he thought that his friend would agree with him, that what was done there furnished no matter of exultation, either in the act or the example. These soldiers were not citizens; but base hireling mutineers, and mercenary sordid deserters, wholly destitute of any honourable principle. Their conduct was one of the fruits of that anarchic spirit, from the evils of which a democracy itself was to be resorted to by those who were the least disposed to that form as a sort of refuge. It was not an army in corps and with discipline, and embodied under the respectable patriot citizens of the state in resisting tyranny. Nothing like it. It was the case of common soldiers deserting from their officers, to join a furious, licentious populace. It was a desertion to a cause, the real object of which was to level
all

all those institutions, and to break all those connections, natural and civil, that regulate and hold together the community by a chain of subordination; to raise soldiers against their officers; servants against their masters; tradesmen against their customers; artificers against their employers; tenants against their landlords; curates against their bishops; and children against their parents. That this cause of theirs was not an enemy to servitude, but to society.

He wished the House to consider, how the members would like to have their mansions pulled down and pillaged, their persons abused, insulted, and destroyed; their title deeds brought out and burned before their faces, and themselves and their families driven to seek refuge in every nation throughout Europe, for no other reason than this; that without any fault of theirs, they were born gentlemen, and men of property, and were suspected of a desire to preserve their consideration and their estates. The desertion in France was to aid an abominable sedition, the very professed principle of which was an implacable hostility to nobility and gentry, and whose savage war-whoop was "*à l'Aristocrate*," by which senseless, bloody cry, they animated one another to rapine and murder; whilst abetted by ambitious men of another class, they were crushing every thing respectable and virtuous in their nation, and to their power disgracing almost every name, by which we formerly knew there was such a country in the world as France.

He knew too well, and he felt as much as any man, how difficult it was to accommodate a standing army to a free constitution, or to any constitution. An armed, disciplined body is, in its essence, dangerous to liberty; undisciplined, it is ruinous to society. Its component parts are, in the latter case, neither good citizens, nor good soldiers. What have they

they thought of in France, under such a difficulty as almost puts the human faculties to a stand? They have put their army under such a variety of principles of duty, that it is more likely to breed litigants, pettyfoggers, and mutineers, than soldiers *. They have set up, to balance their Crown army, another army, deriving under another authority, called a municipal army—a balance of armies, not of orders. These latter they have destroyed with every mark of insult and oppression. States may, and they will best, exist with a partition of civil powers. Armies cannot exist under a divided command. This state of things he thought, in effect, a state of war, or, at best, but a truce instead of peace, in the country.

What a dreadful thing is a standing army, for the conduct of the whole, or any part of which, no man is responsible! In the present state of the French crown army, is the Crown responsible for the whole of it? Is there any General who can be responsible for the obedience of a Brigade? Any Colonel for that of a Regiment? Any Captain for that of a Company? And as to the municipal army, reinforced as it is by the new citizen-deserters, under whose command are they? Have we not seen them, not led by, but dragging their nominal Commander with a rope about his neck, when they, or those whom they accompanied, proceeded to the most atrocious acts of treason and murder? Are any of these armies? Are any of these citizens?

We have in such a difficulty as that of fitting a standing army to the state, he conceived, done much better. We have not distracted our army by divided principles of obedience. We have put them under a single authority, with a simple (our common) oath of fidelity; and we keep the whole under our annual inspection. This was doing all that could be safely done.

* They are sworn to obey the King, the Nation, and the Law.

He felt some concern that this strange thing, called a Revolution in France, should be compared with the glorious event, commonly called the Revolution in England; and the conduct of the soldiery, on that occasion, compared with the behaviour of some of the troops of France in the present instance. At that period the Prince of Orange, a prince of the blood royal in England, was called in by the flower of the English aristocracy to defend its ancient constitution, and not to level all distinctions. To this Prince, so invited, the aristocratic leaders who commanded the troops went over with their several corps, in bodies, to the deliverer of their country. Aristocratic leaders brought up the corps of citizens who newly enlisted in this cause. Military obedience changed its object; but military discipline was not for a moment interrupted in its principle. The troops were ready for war, but indisposed to mutiny.

But as the conduct of the English armies was different, so was that of the whole English nation at that time. In truth, the circumstances of our revolution (as it is called) and that of France are just the reverse of each other in almost every particular, and in the whole spirit of the transaction. With us it was the case of a legal Monarch attempting arbitrary power—in France it is the case of an arbitrary Monarch, beginning, from whatever cause, to legalise his authority. The one was to be resisted, the other was to be managed and directed; but in neither case was the order of the state to be changed, lest government might be ruined, which ought only to be corrected and legalised. With us we got rid of the man, and preserved the constituent parts of the state. There they got rid of the constituent parts of the state, and keep the man. What we did was in truth and substance, and in a constitutional light, a revolution, not made, but prevented.

prevented. We took solid securities; we settled doubtful questions; we corrected anomalies in our law. In the stable fundamental parts of our constitution we made no revolution; no, nor any alteration at all. We did not impair the monarchy. Perhaps it might be shewn that we strengthened it very considerably. The nation kept the same ranks, the same orders, the same privileges, the same franchises, the same rules for property, the same subordinations, the same order in the law, in the revenue, and in the magistracy; the same lords, the same commons, the same corporations, the same electors.

The church was not impaired. Her estates, her majesty, her splendor, her orders and gradations continued the same. She was preserved in her full efficiency, and cleared only of a certain intolerance, which was her weakness and disgrace. The church and the state were the same after the revolution that they were before, but better secured in every part.

Was little done because a revolution was not made in the constitution? No! Every thing was done; because we commenced with reparation not with ruin. Accordingly the state flourished. Instead of lying as dead, in a sort of trance, or exposed as some others, in an epileptic fit, to the pity or derision of the world, for her wild, ridiculous, convulsive movements, impotent to every purpose but that of dashing out her brains against the pavement, Great Britain rose above the standard, even of her former self. An æra of a more improved domestic prosperity then commenced, and still continues, not only unimpaired, but growing, under the wasting hand of time. All the energies of the country were awakened. England never presented a firmer countenance, or a more vigorous arm, to all her enemies, and to all her rivals. Europe under her respired and revived. Every where she appeared as the protector,

lector, assertor, or avenger, of liberty. A war was made and supported against fortune itself. The treaty of Ryfwick, which first limited the power of France was soon after made: the grand alliance very shortly followed, which shook to the foundations the dreadful power which menaced the independence of mankind. The states of Europe lay happy under the shade of a great and free monarchy, which knew how to be great without endangering its own peace at home, or the internal or external peace of any of its neighbours.

Mr. Burke said he should have felt very unpleasantly if he had not delivered these sentiments. He was near the end of his natural, probably still nearer to the end of his political career; that he was weak and weary; and wished for rest. That he was little disposed to controversies, or what is called a detailed opposition. That at his time of life, if he could not do something by some sort of weight of opinion, natural or acquired, it was useless and indecorous to attempt any thing by mere struggle. *Turpe senex Miles.* That he had for that reason little attended the army business, or that of the revenue, or almost any other matter of detail for some years past. That he had, however, his task. He was far from condemning such opposition; on the contrary, he most highly applauded it, where a just occasion existed for it, and gentlemen had vigour and capacity to pursue it. Where a great occasion occurred, he was, and while he continued in Parliament, would be amongst the most active and the most earnest, as he hoped he had shewn on a late event. With respect to the constitution itself, he wished a few alterations in it. Happy if he left it not the worse for any share he had taken in its service.

Mr. Fox then rose, and declared, in substance, that so far as regarded the French army, he went no farther than the general principle, by which that ar-

my shewed itself indisposed to be an instrument in the servitude of their fellow citizens, but did not enter into the particulars of their conduct. He declared, that he did not affect a democracy. That he always thought any of the simple, unbalanced governments bad; simple monarchy, simple aristocracy, simple democracy; he held them all imperfect or vicious: all were bad by themselves: the composition alone was good. That these had been always his principles, in which he had agreed with his friend, Mr. Burke; of whom he said many kind and flattering things, which Mr. Burke, I take it for granted, will know himself too well to think he merits, from any thing but Mr. Fox's acknowledged good nature. Mr. Fox thought, however, that, in many cases, Mr. Burke was rather carried too far by his hatred to innovation.

Mr. Burke said, he well knew that these had been Mr. Fox's invariable opinions; that they were a sure ground for the confidence of his country. But he had been fearful, that cabals of very different intentions, would be ready to make use of his great name, against his character and sentiments, in order to derive a credit to their destructive machinations.

Mr. Sheridan then rose, and made a lively and eloquent speech against Mr. Burke; in which, among other things, he said that Mr. Burke had libelled the National Assembly of France, and had cast out reflections on such characters as those of the Marquis de la Fayette and Mr. Bailly.

Mr. Burke said, that he did not libel the National Assembly of France, whom he considered very little in the discussion of these matters. That he thought all the substantial power resided in the republic of Paris, whose authority guided, or whose example was followed by all the Republics of France. The Republic of Paris had an army under their orders, and not under those of the National Assembly.

N. B.

N. B. As to the particular gentlemen, I do not remember that Mr. Burke mentioned either of them—certainly not Mr. Bailly. He alluded, undoubtedly, to the case of the Marquis de la Fayette; but whether what he asserted of him be a libel on him, must be left to those who are acquainted with the business.

Mr. Pitt concluded the debate with becoming gravity and dignity, and a reserve on both sides of the question, as related to France, fit for a person in a ministerial situation. He said, that what he had spoken only regarded France when she should unite, which he rather thought she soon might, with the liberty she had acquired, the blessings of law and order. He, too, said several civil things concerning the sentiments of Mr. Burke, as applied to this country.



FINIS.

